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ABSTRACT

A study was done of the career paths of part-time students in higher education in the West Midlands (England). The study involved questionnaire and interview surveys of students in two substantial part-time degree programs, one at Warwick University offering courses in historical studies, literary and cultural studies, and social studies; and the other at Coventry University offering business administration courses. A total of 192 Warwick students and 116 Coventry students completed a questionnaire. In addition, 18 students at each institution were interviewed in more detail. There were significant differences in characteristics of the two groups. Seventy-six percent of Warwick students were women and the average age was 44 while 54 percent of Coventry students were women and the average age was 32. Analysis looked at: prior educational paths, current career paths, and student reasons for educational participation. The results suggested the following conclusions: (1) that students are using part-time degree programs as part of many and varied career paths; and (2) that most career paths do not fit well with the government's declared aims for higher education: employment training and wealth creation. Many students appear to be studying for employment development though it was possible in only a minority of cases to identify a clear link between course work and actual or probable advancement at work. (JB)

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THE CAREER PATHS OF PART-TIME DEGREE STUDENTS

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Paper presented at the SRHE Annual Conference, December 1993.

Introduction

Part-time forms of higher education offer a flexible means for expanding access and participation. They suit students who are unable or unwilling to study full-time because of their work, financial, domestic or other responsibilities. They can be used to build closer links between universities, employers and local communities. And they may be seen as part of a more general philosophy of lifelong or recurrent education. In short, they offer something to appeal to those of every political persuasion. It is not surprising, therefore, that part-time higher education has grown rapidly during the last twenty years (Tight 1991).

This growth has taken place with relatively little understanding of the reality of studying part-time for the student. Institutions of higher education, employers and funding agencies have been willing to encourage, and to some extent support, the idea of expanding part-time study. Funding agencies have sponsored pilot projects or financed part-time places; employers have funded employees on part-time programmes; higher education institutions have modularised degrees and recruited locally. In many cases, however, only minimal adjustments have been made to practices and expectations. Universities, in the main, seem to have assumed that part-time students are mature students with a reduced workload.

The purpose of this paper is to begin to explore just how part-time students do, in practice, link their studies with their work, domestic and social roles. While there is a considerable literature from a variety of disciplines - anthropology, biology, economics, psychology, sociology - which is of relevance to these issues, we lack an inter-disciplinary understanding (Blaxter and Tight, forthcoming).

In this paper, we use the concept of 'career paths' in a general sense. In everyday use, this term is typically used to describe a job with prospects. Here we are using it to refer to the entire social position of the individual, to suggest the possibility of a multiplicity of alternative routes and connections throughout adult life.

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Methodology

The paper is based on research carried out over the last two years, involving questionnaire and interview surveys of students on two substantial part-time degree programmes in the West Midlands. One of these programmes is based at our own institution, Warwick University, and at the time of our study offered courses in three areas: Historical Studies, Literary and Cultural Studies, and Social Studies. The other programme is at Coventry University, and was selected as an apparently more practical and vocationally oriented subject area (Business Administration).

In all, 192 (70%) of the Warwick students, and 116 (37%) of those at Coventry, completed a questionnaire. This included questions on their studies, their educational and work experience, and on their personal, social and family situation. In both cases, the responses received appeared to be representative of the total student body, with the student profile suggested by registration data matching that produced from the questionnaires. In addition, 18 respondents at each institution, selected to be representative in terms of age and sex, were interviewed in more detail about their study experience and its relation to other aspects of their lives.

There were significant differences in the make-up of the two student groups in terms of gender and age. While over three-quarters, 76%, of the Warwick students were women, the Coventry group was more balanced, with 54% being women. The Warwick students were also older as a group, averaging 44 years at the time of the study, compared to an average of 32 years for the Coventry students.

Prior Educational Paths

About half of all the respondents (48% of the Warwick students, 53% of those at Coventry) had left school by the time they were aged 16. A substantial minority (20%, 11%) possessed at least the minimum higher education entrance requirement of two A levels when they left school. Almost all (92%, 90%) subsequently participated in organised learning activities, most commonly at work. Hence, by the time they began their part-time degree studies, most of the respondents' qualifications had been substantially broadened or enhanced.

At a number of points in the self-administered questionnaire, we asked about prior education and training experiences. In our piloting of the questionnaire, people wanted to talk about and explain these experiences. In the final version of the questionnaire, respondents were offered space for written comments: on why they had not entered higher education at the time of leaving school, on whether they felt that they had had to sacrifice their education or training to other demands, and on whether they felt that they had had equal access to education and training opportunities (Blaxter and Tight 1993a).

In commenting on why they had not gone straight into higher education from school, the major explanations offered were:

- their decision to follow the 'alternative route' of full-time employment, usually combined with part-time vocational further education;
- their decision **not** to continue in school;
- the lack of information or encouragement to continue;
- social or parental expectations;
- the general absence of choice.

In other words, they either (in the minority of cases) claimed to have positively decided to do something else, or (the majority) described themselves as having been carried forward by their social and economic circumstances, as 'rolling with the flow' of their social peer group. Some individuals, of course, provided a mix of explanations.

Most of the respondents, while considering that they had had equal access to educational opportunities, countered this recognition by providing well-argued explanations based on age, gender and/or class as to why they had not taken them up. When pressed to identify specific barriers to access, these students were able to list most of those recognised by previous researchers. They placed overwhelming importance on one barrier, that of finance, with lesser significance attached to time.

Current Career Paths

The questionnaire also asked students to rank six purposes of degree-level study (see Table 1). These purposes included both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits, and varied in their dependence on the institution for fulfilment. For the Warwick respondents, the purposes most commonly ranked first were 'personal development' (45%), 'fulfilment of ambition' (18%) and 'subject interest' (11%). For the Coventry students, 'career development' (40%) was most often ranked first, followed by 'personal development' (29%) and 'fulfilment of ambition' (18%).

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Table 1 about here

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Analysis of the interview records, however, showed that men and women of all age groups talked about intrinsic pleasures: from having become a student, from the activities of studying, or from the subject. In only a few instances was it possible to categorise one overwhelming reason for studying. The interviews confirmed the questionnaire finding of a low level of subject interest on the Business Administration degree, which was accompanied by an intense pleasure at having got to university. For Warwick students, the interviews revealed career-related objectives (Blaxter and Tight 1993b).

The questionnaire asked about participation in social and recreational activities. Our focus here is on how study fitted with employment and family life, which were the major themes

discussed by students during the interviews.

We have classified 13 of our 36 interviewees (including 9 of those at Warwick) as alternating their roles as students with their other life roles as workers, spouses, parents or community members (Blaxter and Tight 1994). Some had given up employment in order to study, while others were delaying marriage or starting a family until their studies were finished. All but one of the 'alternators' were unemployed or retired.

The other 23 (14 of them at Coventry) were attempting to combine their roles as students with all of their other responsibilities. All but one of them were in full-time employment. Eleven interviewees had dependent children at home. Five of them (two men and three women) were combining full-time employment with caring for dependent children and part-time study. Another two students (both women) were combining study with childcare and part-time or flexi-time working.

When the interview transcripts are examined in more detail, it is possible to identify educational participation being engaged in as part of a range of career path strategies. These strategies related education to work or family roles, or saw it as an activity to be engaged in for its own sake.

Thus, participation in a part-time degree programme was linked to employment in the following ways:

1. in the expectation, or hope, of advancement at work;
2. in order to maintain one's employment position;
3. as a substitute for a boring or unfulfilling job;
4. as a (temporary) substitute for the lack of a job (unemployment).

It was related to family roles:

5. as a (permanent) substitute for the lack of a job (retirement);
6. in association with the educational participation of children or partner.

And it was engaged in for its own sake:

7. as a continuing activity or out of interest in the subject;
8. as an activity leading to certification.

There were, of course, cases where elements of a number of career path strategies can be identified, but for each of our interviewees one of those named appeared to be dominant. These strategies will now be illustrated by examples.

1. Educational participation in the expectation, or hope, of advancement at work.

> "I'd started off in the sixth form but then decided that wasn't the route I wanted to take, and having left school almost straight away realised that was

probably the wrong thing to do, so I started a BTEC national course... in the evenings... I got the results and then thought if I take a year off... it just wouldn't benefit me, so I thought I might just as well get straight in and get on with it and get the degree." (man, 20s, Coventry)

"I felt that's how my career was going... It was better to do it now and get it finished because there might be courses that my company might want [me] to go on... and you never know, in a year's time they might look on it differently, depending on what money the company has got. There's a lot of people studying in our company." (woman, 30s, Coventry)

2. Educational participation in order to maintain one's employment position.

"I don't feel I am ready to stagnate and I felt perhaps I would keep my options open... a way I can gain experience, gain knowledge and I would perhaps stand a better chance if another position came up." (woman, 40s, Coventry)

"I felt I ought to be aiming somewhere, particularly working with professionally qualified people with degrees... and there I was with nothing concrete under my belt... I can't go on working with no advancement and no extra training." (woman, 30s, Coventry)

3. Educational participation as a substitute for a boring or unfulfilling job.

"I don't really enjoy the work that I do so I look forward to college... It gives me a bit of energy and... takes the drudgery out of... I don't know what I'd do if I didn't do it." (man, 20s, Coventry)

"I started to feel that there was more to me, because I knew my job inside out." (woman, 30s, Coventry)

4. Educational participation as a (temporary) substitute for the lack of a job (unemployment).

"I have got a brain that tells me I can do it but I have to find a job... If you've got a degree it counts for a lot more." (man, 30s, Coventry)

"I said to my wife that I would like to change direction, but I don't know what to do really... So she said, well why don't you go and get yourself educated because I haven't got any qualifications." (man, 40s, Coventry)

5. Educational participation as a (permanent) substitute for the lack of a job (retirement).

"I was beginning to feel I should do something and my daughter pointed it out in the local paper... I had always enjoyed study." (man, 60s, Warwick)

"I had to start having another re-think. There was another full-time job gone, if you like." (woman, 40s, Warwick, who had retired early to care for her parents)

6. Educational participation in association with the educational participation of children or partner.

"The youngest started [school] in September and I started in October... I'd been thinking about it for a while." (woman, 30s, Warwick)

"It was a case of long held ambition and having the time at last without too many distractions at home to actually get on with it." (man, 40s, Coventry)

7. Educational participation as a continuing activity.

"I'd always given up one evening for study and I just went to various things and with the University so close." (woman, 30s, Warwick)

"Well, it seemed a natural progression... I've always done further education of some sort, leisure classes mostly... It was my husband actually said why didn't I try a subject with a certificate at the end." (woman, 30s, Warwick)

8. Educational participation as an activity leading to certification.

"I suppose at the end of the day I'm looking for almost a constant testing and... compare it to the man who plays golf. The golfer is always trying to get his handicap down, he frets and worries about how to get it down. Now I won't say I fret and worry, but I like the challenge and to be tested. To be successful, that gives me a glow." (man, 60s, Warwick, for whom education had been a continuous activity, but who preferred certification when it was available)

"I had two years sponsored on the HNC and HND Business Studies... and after that I had to follow the track they [his sponsoring employer] wanted... but after that... I didn't want to stop. I'd got interested in

economics and this opportunity came up, so I came here and carried on." (man, 30s, Warwick)

The interviews showed that participation in higher education was connected to a diversity of career path positions and belied stereotypes. There was some indication of study taking the place of raising children. There were men and women in the younger age group who felt that combining study with employment meant that they had to put off making new family relationships; and there were married women in full-time employment who linked their study to having no children and/or no older dependents.

The interviewees also included a woman combining full-time employment with sole responsibility for young children, and who engaged in education for its own sake as a continuous activity, in the same way as other students with fewer roles to combine. In addition, we found men, one of whom we have quoted here, who placed their participation in higher education within the development cycle of their family.

Conclusions

While we would not claim that the two part-time degree programmes we have examined are wholly representative of a diverse and expanding area of provision, the analysis suggests a number of interim conclusions.

First, it is clear that the students we studied are using these part-time degree programmes as part of many and varied career paths. In some cases, this usage is multi-purpose, while in others it changes over the period of study. The students are also adept and articulate at explaining their usages, resisting attempts to label them in ways with which they lack sympathy.

Second, most of these career paths do not fit well with the government's declared aims for higher education, which stress its role in employment training and wealth creation. While many of these students appear to be studying, at least in part, for employment development purposes, it is only possible in a minority of cases to identify a clear linkage with actual or probable advancement at work. For others, studying is a means to avoid downward career mobility, a substitute for boring employment or unemployment, or is seen as having little if any linkage to employment at all.

Third, the analysis is perhaps less disturbing if we incline to the view favoured by many working in higher education, as well as by some of those in opposition parties: namely, that access to higher education should be regarded as a kind of citizen's right, regardless of their motivations or purposes. For then we do not not need to concern ourselves so much with priorities, and can indeed congratulate ourselves on the manifold needs our courses appear to be able to serve. But we should perhaps be wondering just how well single programmes really can meet all of

these needs, and just how effectively our institutions of higher education are adapting themselves to the pressures this creates.

The expansion in the numbers of part-time higher education students may enhance the voice of all students with adult work or family commitments. The significant difference between these students and those whose educational path has been uninterrupted is not age, nor mode of study, but rather their diversity of responsibilities.

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Table I: Study Purposes

Purpose	Percentage Ranking Highest	
	Coventry Students	Warwick Students
Personal Development	29	45
Subject Interest	1	11
Fulfilment of Ambition	18	18
Career Development	40	9
Recreation	1	2
Keeping Stimulated	3	9
Other	10	6
Totals	100	100

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